

Claude Albert, Legislative Chair, Connecticut Council on Freedom of Information

In Opposition to Senate Bill No. 1234, An Act Concerning Nondisclosure of Residential Addresses of Certain Public Officials and Employees.

Friday, April 8, 2011

Sen. Coleman, Rep. Fox and members of the Judiciary Committee:

My name is Claude Albert, and I am the legislative chair of the Connecticut Council on Freedom of Information, an organization committed to furthering government transparency and accountability. We strongly oppose Bill 1234 and urge the committee to reject this ill-considered proposal.

This bill would undermine the integrity and usefulness of the municipal record – a system of open documents that has been fundamental to the functioning of political, commercial and legal life since the King of England ruled Connecticut. In the process it would create an unworkable and costly burden for municipal officials.

The address is not an incidental piece of data on most of these records but information that is integral to their very purpose. Land transfers, zoning and land-use applications, liens, building permits, grand lists, and tax records are all about property, and thus all about addresses. They are often indexed and accessed by address. Even voter lists are maintained by street address.

The completeness of these records is both a check on the competence and fairness of local government and an essential tool in daily commerce and civic life.

As bad as this bill is for the public, it would create a nightmare for municipal clerks, assessors, building officials, zoning officials, registrars and other local officials. The bill would apply to thousands of government employees, and the volume of records affected would be very large. The task of accurately identifying records that fall under the prohibition and then redacting them case-by-case would be enormous and costly. People would move in and out of the proposed exempted classes. Software would have to be developed and purchased since many of these documents are now on electronic databases. Many documents, such as deeds and mortgages, are not produced by the municipality but are simply filed with the town clerk by banks and lawyers. A way would have to be found to redact all of these records.

Other potential impacts suggest themselves. How, for example, could a zoning or inland wetlands board conduct a public hearing on a land-use request by a member of the protected class without revealing the address of the property involved? What

kind of delays would the public experience in accessing public documents needed in the course of ordinary business?

While security concerns motivate this proposal, we question whether the bill would be effective in achieving its goal in the digital era. And while it is always possible to imagine a way in which a public document can be turned to ill purpose by someone determined to do so, that cannot outweigh the value of a complete and open public record in ensuring government integrity and facilitating civic and commercial life.